

Research Staff of the Year – Faculty of Humanities



Name: Dr Sophie Yarker
Position: Research Fellow
Research area: Sociology

My background is in both Sociology (from my undergraduate studies) and Human Geography (from my Masters and PhD). My PhD research was a study of local belonging and attachment in the context of urban change and from this I have developed a longstanding interest in the local level of urban life. I am particularly interested in the social economy and how communities support and sustain themselves through local forms of community action, often in the face of structural inequalities.

I started working at UoM in 2018 when I joined the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing (MICRA). From 2021 I have been working on the Leverhulme Trust-funded project [Urbanisation and Population Ageing](#) which compares how seven cities across the world support older support diverse populations of older people and how older people themselves experience these urban environments.

In your own words, please describe your outstanding research whether that be an output, impact, contribution to the environment:

Working with the Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group ([MUARG](#)) it has been fascinating to explore my interest in local communities through the lens of urban ageing. This has led me to my current research focus on social infrastructure and in 2022 I published my first single author monograph, [Creating Spaces for an Ageing Society: The Role of Critical Social Infrastructure](#). This book reviews the existing literature from a range of disciplines on how the shared spaces in our communities can create supportive urban environments for older people by providing opportunities for social encounter and the development of networks of social support.

In 2020 was also lucky enough to be involved in a longitudinal, qualitative research [project](#) looking at the impact of social distancing on the lives of older people living in Greater Manchester. Here I was able to use the networks and relationships with community organisations I had built up during my time in Manchester to ensure the voice of under-represented groups were included in the research.

What motivated you to do this?

Exploring urban ageing through the lens of social infrastructure I discovered that a lot of existing literature on how older people experience local communities already discusses the importance of shared spaces but without conceptualising them as social infrastructures. These discussions also seemed to be occurring simultaneously across different literatures and disciplines. It seemed like a useful and important task then to try and bring this rather disparate set of literatures together and to see whether the concept of social infrastructure was helpful in providing some further theoretical depth to our understanding of urban ageing.

I have always enjoyed working with partners outside of academia and feeling that my research has some use and benefit to the communities it involves. Therefore, during the [Covid-19 study](#) it was vital that not only the voices, but the needs of marginalised groups were included. This not only impacted the findings of the study but shaped its design also.

What are you planning to do next?

In terms of research, I would really like to revisit some of the older people and community organisations involved in the Covid-19 project. The original project followed the participants over the first 12 months of the pandemic, so I think it would be really interesting and worthwhile to see how older people, and the organisations supporting them, are adapting to life post-pandemic. I would also like to do some more empirical research around social infrastructures; especially how they face the cost of living crisis.

Another priority is continuing to grow the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of MUARG. One of the strengths of the group is its diverse membership, including those from organisations outside of academia such as the Centre for Ageing Better and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. I would like to continue to support their involvement in academic research on ageing by co-authoring publications and co-producing research as well as finding new ways of involving their expertise.